

CHRISTIANITY
AND SOCIETY

A GUIDE TO THE THOUGHT OF
REINHOLD NIEBUHR

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/ Christianity
and Society /

by

E. L. ALLEN



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REINHOLD NIEBUHR was born on June 21, 1892, a son of the manse. Educated at Elmhurst College and Yale University, he went in 1913 to Detroit as minister of Bethel Evangelical Church, remaining there till, in 1928, he took up his present position as Professor of Christian Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion in Union Theological Seminary, New York. He has visited this country and Europe many times, and gave the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1939. In the periodical 'Christianity and Crisis' he has found a means of giving regularly to the public his incisive comments on social, political, and international developments, and B.B.C. listeners will be familiar with his voice as a speaker on current events.

AMERICA AND GERMANY

SOME two years before Germany was so rudely changed by Hitler's seizure of power, I spent a fortnight at that picturesque and delightful Hanoverian town of Göttingen, as one of the students attending a Summer School in Theology and Philosophy. The lecturers were drawn in the main from the staff of the University, but several scholars were present from the Scandinavian countries, and on one occasion we were addressed by an American Lutheran of German extraction. He gave us a vivid, indeed a lurid, picture of religion in its American setting, with its million-dollar investments, its advertising methods, and its high-pressure evangelism. I shall not soon forget the shock which this description gave to the staid Lutheran pastors who listened to it, and one of them afterwards begged me to

reassure him that, in our country at any rate, things were not as bad as that. I tell that story in order to bring out the sharp differences between the American and the German points of view, since only as we first realise this can we appreciate what Niebuhr has achieved in fusing the two and eliciting the best from each.

Like Barth, Niebuhr represents a reaction against a mode of thinking which was dominant in his earlier days, that liberalism to which he constantly refers as an over-optimistic version of Christianity which robbed it of its offence and at the same time of its strength. But he is himself deeply indebted to one phase of this—that 'Social Gospel' which was the dominant feature of church life in the United States up to the first World War. It was in a sense the continuation on a new plane of that revivalist fervour which was so characteristic of America in the nineteenth century and which is associated for us with the names of Moody and Sankey. The appeal for individual conversion was replaced by the effort to win society as such for the Gospel ; the Sermon on the Mount was to be the

law of business and politics as well as of personal living. The outstanding personality in this movement was Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), a Baptist minister of German descent, who for the last sixteen years of his life occupied the chair of Church History in the theological seminary of his denomination at Rochester. One of Niebuhr's best known books, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, is composed of lectures delivered in connection with a foundation in memory of Rauschenbusch, and he can be regarded as in some respects a successor to him.

Rauschenbusch's most important contribution to the subject is his book *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1918), which calls for a 'working partnership' between Christian evangelism on the one hand and 'real social and psychological science' on the other. 'The social gospel,' he writes, 'seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience.' His purpose is to provide the new movement with an adequate theological basis. The most striking feature in what he has to offer is his interpretation

Ritschl
of sin in terms of social solidarity. He borrows from Schleiermacher and Ritschl their conception of a kingdom of evil, a solidarity of mankind in sin and guilt, and urges that this is the equivalent for our time of the old doctrines of a personal devil and original sin. Similarly, he seeks to give new meaning to the Atonement by showing how Jesus was caught up into the evils which work out in society as exploitation, war, and priestcraft, and so perished as a victim of the solidarity of evil that he might make possible a solidarity of good in God's kingdom. Less profound by far is the discussion of social salvation, where it is affirmed that 'superpersonal forces are saved when they come under the law of Christ.' As we shall see, Niebuhr regards such assertions as preposterously inadequate to the complexities of organised society.

But the really decisive influence upon Niebuhr's development was something in the realm of personal experience, the years, I mean, which he spent at Detroit while Henry Ford was building up the industry which made his name world-famous. He went as

minister to a congregation with some fifty or sixty members only ; when he left it to go to Union Theological Seminary in his present position, there were eight hundred names on the roll. As a witness of the phenomenal expansion of Detroit, he was made acutely aware of the human price which has to be paid for industrial progress and of the deceptions to which the holders of economic power resort in order to justify themselves before the world. Ford's policy of high wages turned out to be a façade behind which went on an exploitation of the worker, as ruthless as it was scientific, setting no value upon him except as one part of the vast mechanism needed for purposes of mass-production. Many of the workers revolted against the system, and the young minister of the Evangelical Church shared their revolt ; alongside of the duties of his congregation, he threw himself into the labour movement as it was taking shape around him. He acquired in those years an insight into the evils of modern industrialism and an enhanced faith in the human values which need to be preserved against its encroachments, so that all his

thinking turns in the end about those theological issues which have practical implications for the social life of our time.

It will be of interest to put beside Niebuhr at this point a man whose thought was moving along much the same lines and to whom he is, I imagine, not a little indebted. I refer to Paul Tillich, the philosopher and theologian who was exiled from Germany at the advent of National Socialism to power and who became in due course one of Niebuhr's colleagues in Union Theological Seminary. He was one of the leaders of a small, but not uninfluential, group of people who called themselves Religious Socialists, and who sought, both by intellectual work and by practical collaboration, to build a bridge between Lutheranism and Social Democracy. One of Tillich's most important contentions is that Marxism is a secularised form of Biblical teaching : for it the chosen people is the proletariat, the Kingdom of God has become the classless society, and so on. While he accepts the traditional Lutheran view that the Kingdom of God cannot be realised in this world, but only beyond it, Tillich holds

that in the course of history crises arise in which a decision for one alternative against the other is, in fact, a decision for the Kingdom of God. Such a moment, he suggests, has arrived in our own day, when there is a call of God to break with capitalist society and to create a new and more human one.

LUTHER AND MARX

TO be sure, Tillich is aware that there is something novel in this proposal for an alliance between Lutheranism and Social Democracy, since more affinity would seem to exist between Calvinism and the latter. But Niebuhr in his turn is intent on negotiating this unusual association, so that we might not unfairly present his thought as a dialogue between Luther and Marx in which each learns from the other. Let us therefore imagine that we are listening in to a meeting of the Brains Trust, at which the only two members are Martin Luther and Karl Marx, specially resuscitated for the purpose, while Niebuhr acts as question-master.

He begins by asking the question : ' What is man ? ' of each in turn, taking Luther first. Man, the Reformer replies, is a fallen

being. Created in a condition of original righteousness and with powers altogether beyond the human as we know it to-day, he has fallen from that high estate and lost the image of God. He has fallen by pride, since he listened to the solicitations of the tempter and aspired to be as God. That pride is rampant to this day, especially in society, where man preys upon man and a pious prince is a rare bird. Society indeed is little better than a wild beasts' cage in which the strong devour the weak. Man is corrupt in sense, reason and will, yet he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the fact: he adds to his other sins that of laying claim to a virtue that he does not possess. Sin is subtly inter-woven with every human activity, it is a curse from which we can never free ourselves, and from which even the grace of God cannot liberate us this side of the grave. What we call moral progress is but the substitution of one form of sin for another: man is like the drunken peasant who, when he has been helped on to his horse on one side, only falls off at once on the other.

How does Marx answer the same question?

Man, he declares, is the product of the economic conditions amid which he lives. At the beginning, in the idyllic state of primitive communism, he was happy and lived in harmony with his fellows. With the introduction of private property, a curse fell on him and he was condemned to toil and conflict. For man is an animal which hunts in classes, and between classes there is no law save that of the jungle, kill or be killed. The holders of power are prompted by no considerations but those of self-interest, though they always endeavour to conceal their greed and brutality behind some elaborate pretence of virtue, altruism, and public spirit. Society is thus an agony of exploitation, a mass of discontent, and while there has been technical advance, there has been no real amelioration of the lot of the toiling multitudes. No revolution has yet done more than substitute one exploiting group for another, the oppressed have been duped every time.

‘How interesting!’ the question-master remarks, ‘You, Marx, might almost be translating into the language of politics a good deal of what Luther has been saying in the

idiom of religion. But shall we now go on to the second question: This being the human situation as you diagnose it, what remedy do you propose?'

Luther replies by three propositions. First, the human problem is only to be solved by the grace of God and the Gospel of Christ. Life in this world is corrupt and evil, and evil passions rage even in the heart of the saint. But there is a mercy of God which bears with us and is willing to receive us; in return, we must recognise that all our righteousness is as filthy rags and place our trust in Christ alone and not in any moral achievement on our part. Second, since there is no prospect that more than a minority will ever accept the Gospel and be justified by faith, God has, so to speak, mercifully provided for us in the state a means of temporal salvation. We should therefore pray for the authorities to whom the sword has been entrusted, that they may check the anarchic impulses of the unregenerate and maintain the fabric of law and order, so that we may receive in peace the consolations of the Gospel. Finally, the state of the world will

grow worse and worse, and we must wait in hope of the Lord's Return and the end of this whole sorry condition of things.

Marx states his own case by taking up one by one the propositions thus outlined by Luther. The first he dismisses brusquely. Feuerbach has demonstrated that religion is mere illusion, and hard facts show that it is the opiate of the toiling masses, served out to them by their masters and the priests they hire. Granted that the essence of the state is power, he sees no reason why the present holders of power should benefit by tame submission on the part of their victims. Let the latter rather seize and hold this power for themselves. The class-war must be fought to the bitter end, till victory falls to the exploited. In all previous instances, to be sure, the new class has proved as rapacious as the old. But this cannot happen any longer, for when the last class arrives at mastery, there will be none for it to exploit : it will therefore bring with it the elimination of all classes and the reign of justice. The workers of the world are the destined saviours of the world. On the last point, Marx too

is pessimistic as to any immediately impending development. Wealth will accumulate in ever fewer hands and other classes sink hopelessly into the proletariat. But when the turn of events has once come, man will at last become truly man and all distinctions will be dissolved in the equality and peace of the classless society.

At this point the Brains Trust breaks up. Fortunately, however, we can detain the question-master long enough to ask him at what conclusion he has himself arrived. His answer will, I imagine, run somewhat as follows : ' As I hinted a little earlier, I find a most curious mixture of agreement and difference in these two positions. For example, to repeat what I said then, if man has fallen as Luther declares he has, then Marx's description of society gives a fairly accurate picture of what the consequences may be expected to be. On the solution of the problem, I am inclined to follow Luther on his first and third points, while finding more in common with Marx on the second. I regard justification by faith as the one possibility for the individual if he is to attain peace of

*is that the only
definition of progress*

mind and as the basis of the moral life. I am convinced too that the easy belief in progress which our fathers held must be abandoned : technical advances do not eliminate evil, they may only provide it with fresh and more appalling forms of expression, as in National Socialism and atomic warfare. But Marx is still the victim of this illusion to some extent ; he imagines that the proletariat will be exempt from human failings, that just because they come last on the list, they will be free from the will to power. He is right, however, when he rejects the quietism of Luther and calls for political action to change the distribution of power as between social groups. Can we not therefore take something from each ? Can we not make of Marx our guide to action here and now, while we use Luther's insights to criticise and sober them, as well as to provide us with a personal religion and an ultimate hope ? '

2 X That indeed is the position which Niebuhr occupies in all his books. We should throw ourselves into the struggle for a just society, while at the same time realising that when that society comes it will be much less just

than we imagine now. All our achievements, while we so act, will be imperfect and all our acts in some way tainted with self-interest, but the mercy of God will defend us against despair. Finally, while we really do God's will and serve his kingdom as we identify ourselves with the cause of social justice, we look for the fulfilment of our hopes in a kingdom beyond this world. We must neither with Marx take the social problem too seriously and become fanatics, nor with Luther evade it and so become quietists. The realisation of the inevitable shortcoming of all human efforts must not be allowed to cripple the will, though it should curb our pride. Indeed, we are more likely to build the new social structure in humanity and justice if we bear in mind all the while that we are far from infallible.

One can put Niebuhr's position into more theological language by saying that he applies Luther's principle of justification by faith, confined in the Reformer's case to the sphere of personal conduct, to that of political responsibility. According to Luther, the Christian cannot hope to be free from sin during his life in this world. He must indeed strive

against it to the full extent of his power, but he must continually seek forgiveness for that by which he falls short of God's will. In the same way, Niebuhr would have us accept the plain fact that politics is a realm of relativities in which we can seldom if ever do anything which has not some taint of evil about it. Instead therefore of avoiding politics in the interests of a perfectionism impossible to human life in this world, we should act according to our best insights and trust that God in his mercy will forgive our inevitable shortcomings in his service. For action within society and in the name of justice is, as the prophets insisted, a form of God's service.

HUMAN NATURE

NIEBUHR'S Gifford Lectures bear the title : *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and all his thinking may be said to turn around the nature of man, his situation in the world, his existence as an individual and as a member of some collectivity, the extent of his powers and the credibility of his hopes. Man, as he describes him, has three levels of existence ; he is a part of nature, an ordering and systematising *reason*, and a *spirit*, open to a higher world. That man is part of nature is evident enough ; it is the basis of the materialistic jest that 'man is what he eats,' for there is a whole set of activities which we share with the animals. But man possesses powers which mark him off from the animal, powers especially of organisation ; he can systematize his experience so that it yields him a body of know-

nature
reason
spirit

ledge which he calls a science, whereas the animal works with instinct and habit ; he can organise his outer life, so that instead of hunting in a pack he creates the nation-state.

- 3) Finally, man is aware of ideals which outlast his life and at their prompting he can subdue instinct and even sacrifice life itself ; he has knowledge of a moral law which is above the state ; and he has indefinite possibilities of self-criticism, so that he can pass judgment to-day on the achievements and ideals of yesterday, to-morrow can do the same with those of to-day, and so on till he draws his last breath—and perhaps beyond !

* The trouble with man, however, is that he has never really been able to accept himself for what he is ; he finds the truth either too exacting in its demands or insufficiently gratifying to his pride, and he therefore takes refuge in illusions. These illusions can be classified under two heads, according as man sinks himself into nature and so falls short of his destiny or arrogates to himself a place to which he is not entitled and so invades the prerogatives of God.

Thus there are those who would make of

man little more than an animal of the highest order : his freedom consists in the gratification of his impulses ; sex is reduced to a mere biological urge, and civilisation is regarded as a set of unfortunate restraints which perhaps we must endure for a while longer. Or there are those, like the Marxist, who would say that the human nature of any period is determined by the economic system of that period, so that man is damned under capitalism and will be saved under communism. Others, again, are incurably romantic : they listen to 'the call of the blood,' they hark back to the days 'when wild in woods the noble savage ran,' they would breed a race of supermen or they set up a totalitarian state which is in fact a modern and scientific version of the old tribalism.

On the other hand, the mistake has constantly been made of identifying spirit with reason in man and supposing therefore that he can attain his goal merely by more rational conduct of his life. Psycho-analysis, for example, will dissipate the taboos which still linger underground in the mind, will dispel the age-long illusion of religion, and will at

not only progress

last make freedom possible. Or education can be trusted to close the gap between those who march in the van of progress and those who bring up the rear ; the extension of knowledge will eliminate mistrust and suspicion, demonstrate that there is a common interest of capital and labour and persuade the jealous nations to combine and secure the benefits of peace. To-day it is said on all hands that as science has achieved such astounding successes in the world of nature, there is no reason why it should not bring us deliverance amid our social distresses ; the principles of impartial enquiry and the systematic application of knowledge are as relevant and as potent in the new sphere as in the old.

We can best apprehend the significance of Niebuhr's view of man if we confine our attention to this last suggestion. It is claimed that what science has done for things it can do for human beings ; that is to put the contention crudely but not, I think, inaccurately. But, to begin with, this is to overlook the vast gulf which separates persons from things. The most ardent research worker has to recognise

that his laboratory assistants have to be handled in a quite different way from that which is appropriate in the case of his apparatus. Persons may not be manipulated, they should be studied and respected.

There is, however, a more serious consideration which is very much to the point here. The student of the natural sciences is not implicated personally in his work and its results, as is the case with the student of the social sciences and even more with the active worker in the political field. In any question of human relationships we are to some extent interested parties; our choice between two alternative solutions cannot but be affected by the fact that our interests will be served by the one and injured by the other. A degree of impartiality is within our reach, but absolute impartiality is for ever beyond us, and we are always much less impartial than we imagine. Marxist criticism has been able to expose the class-standards which lay behind the work of liberal historians who did not doubt that they had achieved objectivity, and we who are not Marxists see party propaganda where they lay claim to scientific

truth. There is always therefore a personal equation to be considered : our physics may be without prejudice, but our sociology is likely to be vitiated by a concealed social bias.

sin = self interest
To express what this means we must in the end fall back on the old-fashioned term 'sin.' For while it is true that self-interest often functions unconsciously, so that we pervert the facts without being aware that we are doing so, the point must be reached in some cases where we become aware of what we are doing but decide not to face the ugly facts. Self-deception is partly unconscious and partly conscious. That an element of the latter enters in is something we are more ready to concede in the case of others than in that of ourselves, but as their vision in turn is more acute when directed upon us than when turned inwards, we must suppose the fault universal. Man, indeed, is not disposed to see himself as a sinner. He can be relied on to produce any number of accounts of himself which either relieve him from guilt by showing that he could not do otherwise or concentrate on his good points till he becomes god-like.

The one thing for which he is consistently unwilling is the acknowledgment that he has sinned.

It is precisely this fact of sin which Niebuhr puts in the centre of the picture. Sin takes on many forms, but they can be reduced ultimately to two: sensuality and pride. By the former, man degrades himself to the level of nature; by the latter, he aspires to be as God. When war, revolution, and economic crisis conspire to disturb his complacency, he fondly imagines that a little more knowledge and organisation will do all that is needed. He shuts his eyes to the fact that knowledge may be of evil as well as of good and that organisation is as potent for destruction as for construction. Was it not the best educated and the most efficient nation in the modern world that bred Hitler? Progress is a real fact; man extends his mastery over nature and provides himself with more complicated social structures, swifter means of communication, and more comfortable adjuncts to his working life. But the dread possibility of evil attends on each such advance. The better organised the state, the more fearful does it become as

*
sensuality
pride
degradation
evocation

an instrument of war ; education and the radio bring unscrupulous propaganda to bear on the masses ; leisure may prove a curse to a generation which does not know how to use it. At all levels of human achievement we have to face the possibility that what has been gained may be corrupted by man's perennial selfishness and so turned to his destruction. While therefore we reject all talk of total depravity, the picture of man which we have to put in the place of the old one is grim enough in all conscience.

It is particularly in the sphere of collective life that sin is entrenched, so that the antithesis of ' moral man and immoral society ' becomes a possible one. No doubt, the overgrown societies of our day, by their organised philanthropy and other means, make possible an extension of sympathy beyond the range of less complex groups. But the reverse side of this is that they show new forms of callousness and cruelty. The shareholder easily becomes indifferent to the conduct of the enterprise which sends him his dividend-slips twice a year ; the statesman will falsify a public document though he would abhor a private

lie ; a combine will crush its competitors with utter ruthlessness. Yes, and they will invent plausible enough theories to justify their conduct. A corporation which is making huge profits will write its dismissal-notices on sheets headed : ' Service before self.' An investor who has bribed some Oriental potentate for a concession will come home to talk of ' the white man's burden.' A foreign minister who intends to repudiate a treaty of alliance will explain that he does so in the interests of world-peace. Social groups take up and repeat on a larger scale all the subterfuges and hypocrisies which are condemned in the case of the individual. *

Turn where we will, therefore, there is no escape from the recognition of something, as subtle as it is devastating, at the very heart of human life. This is what Christianity has in mind when it speaks of original sin.

THE CHRISTIAN MYTH

SO we return to our starting-point, to the synthesis of Luther and Marx. In the days of the Social Gospel, it was assumed that, to be politically Left, one needed to be on the same wing of the theological front. Niebuhr has altered this and set a new fashion, orthodoxy in theology combined with political radicalism. The doctrine of original sin, once cited as a justification of repressive policies, now becomes a weapon in the struggle for social justice.

That does not mean, however, that Niebuhr would restore the story in Genesis iii to the place it once held as an actual account of events in the beginning of the human race. He returns to the story in question, but by a very different road from that along which the fundamentalist travels. The narrative has to be understood, not literally, but symbolically. It is myth and not history.

This conception of the myth and its role in religion is one of the most arresting features of Niebuhr's thought ; a philosophy lies behind it which not many find it easy to assimilate. The term 'myth,' of course, goes back to Plato, for whom the highest forms of truth were not expressible by concepts but had to be thrown into the form of a story. What is always true is thus told as if it had happened at some particular point in time. It is to be judged as we would judge a poem or a fugue, the standards appropriate to an engineer's report are wholly out of place here.

Perhaps I may offer an illustration of my own to bring out what I conceive to be involved in such a position. Let us take the instance of D-day and ask how the truth about it can be expressed. Theoretically, the most effective way would be to arrange for a battery of cine-cameras to cover the whole operation from start to finish, so as to preserve a factual record of each detail with the highest possible degree of accuracy. But not merely would such a record be wholly unmanageable—who among us could bear to sit through more than a fraction of it? It would be positively mis-

leading. One would miss the wood for the trees. However finely drawn the meshes of such a representation, the drama, the historic significance of it all would quite slip through. A second possibility would be for an artistic genius who was present as an observer to write a poem, perhaps only a sonnet, to compose a symphony, or to paint a picture with it as his theme. What such a genius would do would be to apprehend and reproduce the thrill and power of the event, its import for generations to come, and so on. With this in view, he would concentrate on the merest fraction of what took place and even that he might distort to suit his purpose. In a painting, for example, he might introduce persons who were not in fact on the spot at the time, such as the rival leaders, using them as symbols of the spiritual forces which clashed in and through the encounter of the armies.

What such an illustration brings out is that we can distinguish broadly two kinds of truth, truth of fact and truth of significance, and that each has its appropriate medium of expression. The canons which are valid for the one must not therefore be used to criticise the other.

More than that, in a great many cases one form of truth can only be expressed adequately at the expense of the other form. A symphony is useless for deciding at what point on the Normandy beach a particular unit landed, and a list of the units engaged with their assigned landing-points militates against the attempt to recapture the experience and assess the importance of the day. Homer's catalogue of the ships is the dullest part of the Iliad. This leads us to a conclusion from which many would shrink, that when religious truth, which is akin to art rather than to science, is expressed through history, it often distorts that history to suit its purpose. A comparison between Kings and Chronicles or between the Synoptists and John makes that clear.

*Fisher would say
yes & no*

To return to Niebuhr. As the narrative of Genesis iii is a myth in this special sense, so the dogma of original sin is a symbol. It brings out that man is conscious that he is not what he ought to be, that his actual condition is of a lower order than that which he recognises as truly human. The contrast between what Adam was before, and what he

05

before & after
became after, the Fall is the contrast between God's intention for human life and what human life actually is in virtue of its frustration of that intention. Niebuhr treats in a similar way such conceptions as those of the Trinity, the sinlessness and Godhead of Christ, the union in him of two natures, the Atonement, and the Second Advent. Each in turn is regarded as a picture the meaning of which has, as it were, to be read off.

Unity of body & spirit
Perhaps the most striking feature of this attempt to reinterpret and vindicate what he speaks of as 'classical Christianity' is the treatment accorded to the words of the Creed: 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.' The stone which a modern generation rejected becomes for Niebuhr the head of the corner. Taken as a symbol, it means that the body and the natural basis of life are integral components of the personality, not something to be repudiated in the interests of a purely spiritual life. When therefore life reaches its goal, these too will have a share in its fulfilment. Further, the body is our means of communication, it makes possible common life and action, so that we should look forward

to a full life in shared enterprise, a thing impossible to disembodied spirits. Hence, in the past, those sects which did not despise this article of faith were usually those most alive to the claims of social justice. That does not mean, of course, that we are any the more disposed to visualise the resuscitation, at some point in the future, of the bodies once committed to the grave. As Niebuhr insists again and again, we must take the symbols seriously, but we should not take them literally.

POWER, LOVE, AND JUSTICE

AFTER this necessary digression, we are free to return to our main theme of the social bearing of Niebuhr's thought. We can perhaps best deal with this by analysing the parts which he assigns to power, love, and justice respectively.

As we look round the world to-day, we are appalled by the extent to which power-relationships dominate it. Power is, of course, of various orders, such as military, political, economic, and ideological. He who controls the radio and the press of his country can instil into men's minds the most fantastic ideas. International treaties tend to lose their validity once they cease to tally with the actual power-relationships between the parties to them. The charter of the United Nations Organisation frankly recognises that world peace depends in the last analysis on the ability of

a few Powers to adjust their interests and work together. Again, power need not be overt ; the mere threat of its exercise may bring the recalcitrant to heel, so that under certain circumstances the maintenance of law and order is not much more than veiled oppression, undeclared class-war, as the Communist would say.

No form of organised society is possible, as far as we can see, without the presence in it of some controlling group which is constantly tempted to abuse its position for its own ends while loudly proclaiming that it seeks only the common good. Sharply opposed to power is that love of which Christianity speaks. But love again takes on two forms. As *mutual love* it is a moral force which has to be reckoned with alongside of power. It is the recognition on our part, that the concerns of others should also be our own, reciprocity in understanding and helpfulness, and the will to restrict our own advantage for the sake of an order of common life which will be to the benefit of all who share in it. Beyond this lies sacrificial love, the supreme illustration of which is in the Cross. This gives with-

out thought of recompense or even recognition, it is willing to surrender itself for the good of others, it is disinterested and reckless even of life.

The first type of love is a necessary element in social cohesion. It produces a spirit of reasonableness and mutual give-and-take, so that friction is prevented and there is less necessity for recourse to the overt exercise of power. It is clear that there are other relations within society than those between oppressors and oppressed, to use the Marxist terminology : coercion is ordinarily reserved for such cases as cannot be dealt with by the adjustment of interest and by compromise between divergent points of view for the sake of a peace which is in the interest of all. But sacrificial love is what Niebuhr calls 'an impossible possibility' : it is the ideal to which life should be directed, but we must not expect that at any given moment it will be fully expressed in action. The ethic of Jesus is 'in obvious conflict with both the impulses and the necessities of men in typical social situations' ; it is concerned with the absolute demand of God upon human life and

not with the expedients required to keep the peace within a given society. It calls for 'an absolute obedience to the will of God without consideration of those consequences of moral action which must be the concern of any prudential ethic.'*

The Christian precept of love cannot therefore be applied without qualification to action in the social sphere as it can where the question is one of personal relationships. Some degree of adjustment, adaptation, or compromise is necessary, since otherwise, for example, the injunction not to resist evil will but open the flood-gates to aggression. Love is to that extent impossible; yet in another sense it is a possibility, since it is always within our power to incorporate a larger measure of it in social institutions. At any given moment, while we cannot hope to achieve what perfect love requires of us, we can achieve more than we have hitherto done. The degree of understanding between individuals and nations can be increased, the economic system can be humanised and legislation can embody a heightened sense on the part of the com-

* *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 56, 63.

munity of its responsibility for its less fortunate members. So that we can do much, even though we shall always fall short of what is required of us by the teaching of the Gospels : we have therefore no reason for disheartenment, and equally none for self-satisfaction.

The form under which love expresses itself within society is justice. Justice at any given moment is the resultant of two sets of tendencies, one due to the balance of power and interest within a community and the other to the desire to achieve understanding and a common basis for life. It is thus such a translation of the ideal of love into the language of social action as is from time to time possible. It is an adjustment between conflicting interests, between claims and counter-claims, to use Niebuhr's own expression, but an adjustment made from the higher vantage-point which is made possible by the acceptance of the ideal of love. With the development of the sense of justice in a community it becomes possible to embody in laws and institutions an ever-increasing degree of concern for weaker groups, so that love of the neighbour is built to some extent into the social fabric and a

larger range of good becomes possible than private charity could hope to achieve. Our social services are a case in point.

Nevertheless no justice that we thus arrive at is ever perfect or final, but is constantly tainted with some degree of injustice. Legislation has always to recognise and curb the tendency on the part of some members of society to take advantage of the others ; wrongs are apt to go unredressed until those who suffer by them disturb the peace by a strike or some other method ; the more highly organised groups can secure larger benefits than the less powerful ones ; wealth and personal influence can often use the letter of the law in ways which defeat its spirit, and so on. Here again there is no occasion for complacency. There is always some injustice, therefore the struggle can never be relaxed : At the same time, some further advance towards justice is always within our power, therefore there is ground for hope and encouragement for action.

We can now see the temper which Niebuhr would have us cultivate : it must be realistic but need not be pessimistic. While well

realistic not pessimistic

aware that there are limits to what we can hope to accomplish, there is room enough within those limits for the efforts of a lifetime. We must cherish no illusions, as though Utopia were round the corner or the simple appeal to follow the Sermon on the Mount would solve our complicated problems ; we must not imagine that an international community can be conjured into existence by protests against national sovereignty or any other propaganda which overlooks the fact that holders of power have no intention of relinquishing that power. At the same time, there is always more which we can do than the pessimists suppose ; there are certain definite and substantial achievements in the direction of justice which ought to be possible for us, if we address ourselves with courage to our tasks. To quote from the concluding chapter of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* : ' It may be that the insights of a prophetic religion may qualify and mitigate the cruelties of the social struggles through which we are passing to a greater degree than now seems probable. It is comforting to know, nevertheless, that if this should not prove true, the truth of

prophetic religion, and of Christianity in so far as Christianity is truly prophetic, must survive the tempests of a dying civilization as an ark survives the flood.*

In other words, the hopes which go unfulfilled in time may come to fruition in eternity. There is a kingdom of God which lies beyond our success and failure, into which the one is built and by which the other is redeemed. Our final satisfaction is where our heart's allegiance is, in the City which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

* 247.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Does Modern Civilization need Religion?* 1928.
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